

March 24, 2004

Dear Reader:

This is to provide a cover letter to Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's Draft Cabin Management Plan and compatibility determination. It is our intent to make this plan widely available for a 30-day public comment period. Please provide comments to:

Kenai National Wildlife Refuge
Attention: Cabin Management Plan
P.O. Box 2139
Soldotna, AK 99669

Comments should be postmarked by April 30, 2004. Additionally, comments can be faxed to (907) 262-3599. Currently the Refuge does not have internet/e-mail capability.

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Since the establishment of the Refuge in 1941 many log or frame structures have come and gone on the Refuge without significant management oversight. Several cabins have been informally designated as "public use" cabins and made available for overnight stay without fee or reservation requirement on a first-come-first-served basis. These cabins have been maintained without any particular plan in mind by both Refuge staff and public volunteers. Over time many of the buildings have deteriorated beyond reasonable use standards; others have been lost due to vandalism or wildfire; some of these have been structures that also may have had significant historical value. Knowing this, and with increased concern expressed by Refuge visitors, we have developed a draft cabin management plan for the Refuge that, if funded and implemented, would provide both an increased quantity and quality of cabins on the Refuge, and protect some notable historic structures from further deterioration.

While considerable effort was made to simplify the draft plan for readability, I still find it lengthy and probably a bit confusing. There are different categories of existing cabins (designated as "public use" or "administrative"), different proposals for addressing future public use of cabins (either through a reservation system and/or continuation of a first-come-first-served arrangement for some cabins), and different standards and nomenclature for the non-public use cabins proposed to be maintained and managed primarily for historic and interpretive use. I encourage reviewers to carefully read and comment on all of the draft plan, but also want to summarize the preferred alternative to help everyone focus on what is specifically being proposed should adequate funding be realized, and if the plan is implemented as currently written.

The proposed (preferred) alternative would take five of the existing recognized “public use cabins” (Vogel Lake; Doroshin Bay – Skilak Lake; and Caribou Island, Nurses’, and Pipe Creek – Tustumena Lake) and upgrade them and make them available by advanced reservation and fee only. Additionally, three existing “administrative” cabins (Renfrew, Big Indian Airstrip, and Chickaloon River) would be added to the proposed new reservation system. The Refrew cabin, currently located along the Kenai River below Skilak Lake would be relocated to Frying Pan Island on Skilak Lake. The Big Indian Airstrip and Chickaloon River cabins would be drastically renovated or replaced and both would be moved to better locations in adjacent areas. The remaining two existing “public use” cabins (Emma Lake and Trapper Joe Lake), and one existing “administrative” cabin (ENSTAR SUP – near Mystery Creek) would be renovated and made available on a first-come-first-served basis with no fee.

The preferred alternative calls for increased maintenance and protection of historical structures and specifically designates the Home and Big Bay Cabins (Tustumena Lake), Harry Johnson Trapping Cabin (Mystery Hills), and Andrew Berg Cabin (Refuge Headquarters) as administrative cabins to be managed for historic and interpretive values, not for overnight use.

Finally, the preferred alternative would allow the Refuge to construct up to six new “public use” cabins, in appropriate areas, and make them available by reservation and fee. Proposed areas include: Snag Lake, Upper Ohmer Lake, McLain Lake, the Skilak Recreation Area, the Swanson River area, and the Headquarters area.

The biggest proposed changes are the proposed additions of new cabins, increased maintenance and protection of many existing cabins, and the transition for use of most of the Refuge cabins from a first-come-first-served basis to a guaranteed use basis by making prior reservations. Each of these proposed changes may affect different Refuge users in different ways. Please give us your comments on these proposed changes. While we have some basic regulations that we must follow, and have some overriding goals for wildlife conservation, the actual administration of the public use cabins is largely up to you – the using public. Please tell us what you think!

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Robin L. West
Refuge Manager